DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 040 193 TE 001 868

AUTHOR Walt, James
TITLE Producing the Radio Play.
PUB DATE 69
NOTE 8p.
JOURNAL CIT Maryland English Journal; v8 n1 p18-24, 26 F 1969

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.50
DESCRIPTORS Acting, Characterization (Literature), College Instruction, *Drama, Dramatics, Playwriting, *Production Techniques, *Radio, Scripts, Secondary Education, Sound Effects, Theater Arts

ABSTRACT

Radio plays can provide opportunities for high school or college students to act without having to memorize scripts. Elements necessary for a well-produced radio play consist of: (1) a suitable play, which may be a simple play or an adaptation of a short story or novel; (2) a radio script which is plausible and feasible within the limitations of radio production; (3) a director who will revise the script readily to provide proper rhythm and dramatic tension as well as promote the acting techniques especially required for radio performance; (4) sound effects which have both verisimilitude and the characteristics needed to establish moods or introduce characters; and (5) student actors capable of assuming various roles, some of which may involve characters whose outlook is alien to their own. (JM)

Maryland English Journal;
Vol. 8, No. 1, Fall 1969

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Producing the Radio Play

JAMES WALT [1]

ED040193

Professor Walt's account of how he became interested in producing radio plays and of what he learned about the craft over the years will interest the reader in the way it is told as well as in what it tells.

IF HE IS sufficiently interested, a person who is neither tone-deaf nor endowed by the Muses with absolute pitch can learn to tap out simple tunes on a piano. By a similar self-help trial-and-error method, I learned something about the craft of the radio script. The time was 1945, the place war-battered Italy. As for the scripts, they were interviews with American soldiers whose stories would presumably keep the morale of radio audiences back home at a healthy level until the Nazi effort collapsed. Chaucer's "God's plenty" would have resembled a poor man's hoard had the author of the *Canterbury Tales* had access to the rich materials afforded me.

Joe, a former actor, played the role of the interviewer and drove the jeep that rolled us up hills and mountains, across snowy landscapes, and through enough mud to swallow a brigade. We carried a monstrous wire recorder that weighed fifty or sixty pounds and we used to send our rolls of magnetic wire to Rome, where they were made into records and shipped to American radio stations.

Interviewing for Radio

We interviewed a lieutenant who had won a Medal of Honor by dashing up a hillside, tearing a machine gun from the hands of German soldiers, and routing dozens of Nazi troops holed up in surrounding houses. G.I. tailors set to work making him neat uniforms in a single afternoon so that he could fly to the States that night looking as unrumpled and unruffled as a studio soldier in a Warner Brothers movie. Joe and I snatched this hero away from an admiring band of majors and colonels, locked him in a big room, and squeezed an interview out of him. We did a story about a trumpeter, now in uniform, who had played with Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland in "Babes in Toyland," and we recorded the chorus of one of the trumpeter's songs. We covered a horse race staged by American soldiers who liked to get into the saddle whenever the fighting slackened. We interviewed a corporal who had gone on a forward patrol and had found himself caught between enemy and American fire.

TE001 868

[1]Assistant Professor, University of Maryland

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Maryland Council of Teachers of English and author TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

Using Synthetic Sound

An important lesson learned from this project was the uses of synthetic sound. When we tried, for example, to record the h-r-r-rumph of the deep-voiced artillery guns hammering at German positions on the other side of a mountain, we got a noise that did not identify with anything heard on land or sea.

Back in the United States at war's end, I taught high school and directed a few class plays, short and long. A single problem kept cropping up: the inability of students to memorize lines until the day of the performance loomed right over them and threatened to bring disgrace on their heads. One of my leading men never learned his part at all and escaped ignominy only because two prompters hid behind furniture on the stage and pulled him through the part as if they were dragging a corpse over hill and dale. We had talented actors in our school and I wanted to give them more opportunities to shine, but how deal with a positive allergy toward memorizing? The answer was the radio play.

Finding a Suitable Play

All I needed was a stage, a curtain, a microphone, a suitable play, and a few "monkey antics" to handle the problems of sound. But suitable plays, I discovered, were almost as hard to track down as the fabled unicorn. Shakespeare had never written for radio though his taste for fantasy and for hopping from continent to continent in a single act suggests that he would have found this twentieth-century medium altogether ingratiating. Neither Shaw nor O'Neill wrote for radio, but perhaps they objected to drudging for weeks on a script which might receive the dubious honor of a one-night performance. True, radio had attracted gifted writers—Arch Oboler for one, Orson Welles for another. But, skimming through plays that went out over the air waves in the twenties, thirties, and forties, I found much that was dated. And sometimes the plays called for large casts or required such a diversity of sounds that one might have suspected an engineer of revising the script and subordinating the actors to every mechanical noise under the sun.

It was the suitor who rejected the gold and silver caskets for the leaden one who satisfied the demands of the lady in *The Merchant of Venice* and, in choosing a one-acter called "The Catwife" as my first radio play, I too placed the odds on a modest choice. The cast was small, the sound problems were simple, and if I had no Boris Karloff to work with [he had broadcast this piece of absurdity from a Chicago station] I had a student who could put all the necessary tensions and agitations into the title role. We performed "The Catwife" twice and this good lady or bad lady, for she was a coun-

terpart of Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde, gave some of our audience a few of those shocks you delight in before your heart has been roughed up by a real tragedy.

Quite recently, as a visiting professor at a Maryland college, I had a second go at the production of radio plays. I began with science fiction, adapting a story about an extraordinary boy whose gift for mischief grew with the same rattling speed as his intellectual powers. Science fiction sometimes laughs at itself and its preoccupation with the theme of ruthless, unlimited power. Our story swung between the poles of comedy and satire and managed to say a few serious things about egotistic parents who would realize their own curtailed and mutilated ambitions through their children. During the school year, I adapted two other short stories and a novel and, turning to a full-length stage play, did only a bit of pruning and grafting before I had an actable radio drama.

Each of these five scripts, excepting only a dramatization of Stevenson's *The Ebb Tide,* represented two or three days' labor, my cast was invariably small, and as the adaptor I was able to tailor the material to my students' talents. There is a second—and immeasurable—advantage in writing your own script. You get to know your characters, turning them inside out like a pair of socks thrown into the wash, and when you come to direct the play you can do justice to the nuances of the dialogue through suitable timing and proper uses of *crescendo* and *diminuendo.*

Writing the Radio Script

To touch on the problems of writing the radio script I shall illustrate what I did with the novel *The Ebb Tide.* Though it runs to 200 pages or more, I was able to recreate the story through five characters. The time is the last quarter of the nineteenth century and three of these characters are beachcombers whom misfortune has stranded in the South Seas. To reduce the novel to a one-act play, I needed a narrator who could sum up a scene in two or three sentences. I might have chosen a choric figure, someone standing outside the frame of the story and able to treat the characters—all of them "damaged souls"—with unfaltering objectivity. But, I feel the choric figure is not very convincing. Summary is far from an adequate substitute for dramatic confrontation and to avoid boring my audience I cut the passages of pure narration to a minimum. Finally, haunted by the need for plausibility and aware that no single character knew enough to supply the audience all the facts it must be fed, I made two of the beachcombers narrators. This I mention as a technical device which might have seemed clumsy, but which my limitations or the limitations of the medium forced

upon me. Though this is the age of computerism and of the automatic answer, no one can anticipate and therefore solve offhand the craftsmanship problems that are the price of writing the radio play.

If you adapt a piece of fiction put together by a master or a first-rate journeyman, some of your technical problems will have been solved for you. One of Stevenson's beachcombers, for instance, was an Oxford graduate. A second was a cockney. Another was a sea captain who had had the Bible thrust down his throat when he was very young and, even while he followed his rip-roaring instincts, he suspected that a Sunday-school God waited and glowered and shaped plans to do him in. A thorough and consistent cockney dialect, spelled with phonetic vraisemblance, would have made difficulties for Stevenson's readers, and as a result Huish, the Londoner, mixes a few samples of dialect with his straightforward English, we take the part for the whole, and we accept him as a satisfactory instance of a cockney. Drunkenness followed by the disgrace of letting his ship go to the bottom with a load of human cargo had kept Captain Davis from getting another command. An Englishman who spends much of his life at sea and finally cuts his ties with his homeland might well drop some of his Briticisms. To simplify matters, rehearsals being limited and high art being beyond our reach, I advised the student who played Davis to use his own unadorned American accent, Philadelphia-minted. The cockney's problem was different. Huish was a brusque, quarrelsome little fellow who thrust himself into danger so that bigger men would be forced to respect him. His hate, his ruthlessness, his sneering, and his boasting set him apart from the other characters and I felt he should assume mannerisms that would distinguish him from his companions. A bantam rooster must not crow like a grown one. And so we gave Huish a high-pitched note which expressed his nervous, overwrought temperament and also we tossed in smatterings of a cockney accent, amusing to American ears and calculated to make him a semi-villain after the fashion of Dickens' sardonic little monster Quilp.

Convention supposes that an Oxford graduate like Stevenson's Herrick would speak pretty much as you or I, and Stevenson himself gave no indication that dialect may be used on both ends of the social scale. Following his lead and recognizing that an Oxford accent would sound wrong to my audience whether well or badly done, I advised the student who played Herrick to let it alone. I also updated the dialogue of the novel where I sensed that it would puzzle my audience, but I retained other expressions that held, as in a tightly corked bottle, the flavor of men's speech seventy-five years ago.

Directing a Play

Directing a play, as I have pointed out, is simplified if you write your own script. Directors make a habit of picking a playwright's work to pieces and one who is worth his salt will, in fact, be absolutely ruthless toward his own script, uncovering weaknesses at his first rehearsal and very likely rewriting at every step. The need for revising may strike home with particular force when the director times his play and its individual scenes. Are there scenes or long speeches that lumber along at a pace that would draw a sneer from Aesop's tortoise? Do too many speeches move at the same clip, fast or slow? Even in a horse race speed is not the only source of diversion. Changes of pace add to the excitement of watching the "gee gees" and the jockey who holds back his mount only to shoot ahead of the field in the closing minutes is a thorough master of dramatic tension. Taking a leaf from him, a director will try to vary the movement of his play with such cunning that the rhythm will serve as a constant source of surprise.

Truth, of course, should never be sacrificed to surprise and to use a rhythm that clashes with the dialogue is to ruin actor's and director's work alike. But if one or more scenes demand a leisurely movement throughout, the director ought to ask himself whether the script needs tightening, for one of the marks of a good script is the diversity of its emotional pattern. Frequently the monotony of this pattern is hidden until a careful rehearsal highlights the play's most minute weaknesses. A wise director therefore regards his first rehearsal as a way of assaying the script and insists on revisions before he translates it into a public performance. If a play has a dominating rhythm akin to a funeral march or moves along in such whirlwind style that the climax lacks sharp definition, the director will recognize a need for rewriting. In any event, if he has chosen his cast well, serious acting flaws should lead him to look at his script with certain dubiety.

Student actors, freed from the chore of memorizing, may carry their few remaining burdens too nonchalantly. It is important, for example, that they come in briskly with their own lines in response to cues; for, the radio play, having neither scenery nor costumes to caress the optic nerve, cannot permit the silence, the breaking of the spell, which results when an actor gropes for his lines. There is danger, too, that as he stands passively in front of the microphone he will convey an impression of inertness to his audience. I have insisted, accordingly, that the actor should gesture freely with the hand that is not holding the script and imitate as far as possible the various muscular reactions of the character he is impersonating.

Actors readying themselves for a radio performance should re-

hearse at least two or three times before a microphone. Speaking into a mike while giving close attention to the radio script is a trick of sorts—soon mastered. Then too, the actor must gauge the carrying power of his voice and stand near the mike or at a distance in accord with that carrying power. He must also practice moving into or beyond the range of the mike so that the audience pictures him entering or leaving a scene. Simple as these techniques are, no director searching for verisimilitude can afford to overlook them.

Deciding on Needed Sounds

I have referred a bit sardonically to plays whose authors make a hoopla over the one-hundred-and-one sounds injected into an otherwise simple script. It is madness to assume that all the noises that assault us in Megalopolis must be introduced into a radio play or that an audience subjected to them will be especially diverted or refreshed. If a scene has action—and it might be only the hammering of the sea in the background—that action should be indicated by appropriate sound. In O'Neill's "Bound East of Cardiff" we imitated the pounding of waves against the side of a ship by rolling peas in a box. In "Two Exiles" we simulated a car crash by hurling a metal basket against a desk. [The radio technician who suggested this device believed that art was more important than studio property—and the desk, besides, already showed the scars of age.] To produce the klop-klop of running horses, strike two coconut shells on a wooden tray covered with gravel. A ship's siren, we are told, can be imitated by blowing vigorously across the mouth of a narrow-necked bottle filled with water. Beating a large drum simulates thunder. Records which furnish a diversity of sounds on a single disk can be bought in metropolitan music shops or purchased from manufacturers. Experiments in reproducing sound, particularly synthetic effects, have fascinated Hollywood technicians for decades. These experiments are still going forward and many, for professional reasons, are wrapped as securely in mystery as the elaborate tricks of a Thurston or a Houdini. Had Napoleon been summing up American rather than British traits, he might have called us a nation of mechanics. Even Emerson, who must have seemed a disembodied intellect to his earthier countrymen, admired Yankee inventors who tinkered with wheels and pulleys and neglected their Plato—that is to say, *his* Plato. In any event, the passion for tinkering remains in Americans despite the generally abstract nature of public education. And it is doubtful if the play director will have to search far and hard to find students eager to employ their bent for mechanics by studying the problems of sound. The abilities of these students may be such that the director can depend on them to handle the sound effects.

A final word on synthetic sound is suggested by the experiences of a BBC director who was producing a radio version of "The Pit and the Pendulum." To reproduce the mixed sound of rats that shrilled and piped and chewed lustily at a prisoner's ropes, the director used a record of chickens.

To many directors of the radio play music is a device of the first importance. A few bars of "mood" music are particularly helpful as a prelude to the play, but music is also used to denote scene divisions and the passing of time. In "The Mother" I used snatches of a theme song for each of the characters and introduced it at every one of their entrances. When "Bright Boy" was performed, a fellow teacher read my verse prologue to the accompaniment of a seventeenth century song he had "taped" as he performed on a recorder. In "Two Exiles," a sentimental melodrama about the 1920s, we wove a Tea-for-Two-Noel-Coward kind of music through our play. Since the radio addresses the ear, a director cannot spend too much time studying ways to titillate that organ.

Maintaining Illusion

Throughout this article I have used the term "radio play" with deliberate indifference to any definition Noah Webster or his successors might have brought forward. The plays I have mentioned were performed in high schools and in college or broadcast from Baltimore or Salisbury, Maryland. If your school boasts an "intercom," it is possible to entertain an entire student body by staging your production in a classroom. Since illusion is of highest importance in the theater arts, I have always insisted that the curtain be drawn while the actors read their lines. For it is only then that the imagination of the listener can shake off the chains of the here and now and make for itself a temporary habitation in any part of the globe, including that geographic wonderland that Shakespeare palmed off on his audience as a seacoast in Bohemia.

Having tested his production on a student audience and desiring to give his actors a sharper incentive to perfect their roles, the teacher should have no difficulty finding a benevolent radio manager who is willing to spare him thirty or forty or fifty minutes' free time. In fact, word is being spread that the radio play, ignominiously buried and forgotten while TV was casting its spell over McLuhan and millions like him, has begun to take hold with a generation to whom it is a new and somewhat exotic art form. Even if local radio stations refuse him free time, the teacher may be able to tap their springs of technical wisdom.

As for the student actor, he may undergo experiences which, paradoxically, cut the deeper because his conscious, reflecting self ignores them. Let us suppose he is a Negro youth portraying a

(Continued on page 26)

Producing the Radio Play *(Continued from page 24)*

white man or a white youth playing a Negro—an interchange of roles that radio makes possible without embarrassing actor or audience. There is no reason, indeed, why students of any color or faith should not play racial and religious minorities, sinking their egos in characters whose angle of vision is alien to their own. If human nature is flinty material forever rejecting change, angles of vision fortunately can change. School integration up to this point has made slow progress toward cleansing America of the racism that fills our cities like a deadlier smog than the horrendous one our health experts declaim against. To lessen this hatred among the young, schools have to furnish their students a knowledge of racial likenesses and differences (without pretending, on the one hand, that the differences are pure fantasy or holding them up as a portent) and have to inculcate a sympathy free from patronizing sentimentality. The director who stages radio plays in an integrated school can undoubtedly work little miracles of interracial understanding—provided he is both informed and of good will.

Selected Bibliography

Charteris, Leslie, *The Saint's Choice of Radio Thrillers*, Hollywood, California: Saint's Enterprises, Inc.
Coulter, Douglass, *Columbia Workshop Plays*, New York: McGraw-Hill
Hackett, Walter, *Radio Plays for Young People*, Boston: Plays, Inc.
Kozlenko, William, *One Hundred Non-Royalty One Act Plays*, New York: Grossett, Dunlap, Inc.
Mackey, David R., *Drama on the Air*, New York: Prentice-Hall
McGill, Earle, *Radio Directing*, New York: McGraw-Hill
Maltz, Albert, *Red Head Baker*
Oboler, Arch, *Fourteen Radio Plays*, New York: Random House
Olfson, Lewis, *Radio Plays of Famous Stories*, Boston: Plays, Inc.